

Effectiveness of the First Steps Module in Developing Learner Autonomy

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1. Introduction

One of the key tenets underlying the philosophy of the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies is the promotion of learner autonomy. Since the SALC opened in 2003, self-access courses known as ‘Modules’ have been offered to first and second year students as a means of raising awareness of and developing, autonomous language learning skills. Much has been written about benefits of learner autonomy in the realm of language learning however attempts to quantify the development of autonomous language learning skills in learners has been scarce to date. The purpose of this research was to gauge the effectiveness of the First Steps Module as an instrument for raising awareness of and developing autonomous language learning skills.

2. Background

2.1 The First Steps Module

The First Steps Module (FSM) is an introductory course offered to first year students that introduces learners to basic autonomous concepts through practical exercises and reflective tasks that are undertaken outside the classroom, either individually or in groups, over an 8 week period. As noted in the introduction, the FSM aims to foster the development and awareness of autonomous language learning skills. Those skills can be defined as the following abilities, namely the

ability to analyze one's language needs (strengths and weaknesses), set goals, create a study plan, select and use materials, use appropriate learning strategies and monitor and evaluate learning progress. These abilities are commensurate with those identified by Sheerin (1997). Sheerin identified these as the "abilities to –

- Analyze one's own strengths/weaknesses, language needs
- Set achievable targets and overall objectives
- Plan a program of work to achieve the objectives set
- Exercise choice, select materials and activities
- Work without supervision
- Evaluate one's own progress"

(1997, p.57)

The FSM is administered by a group of Learning Advisors each responsible for several classes of students. Based on student and Learning Advisor feedback, the FSM has been continually revised over the years to better meet student's needs. However prior to this research project there has been no formal evaluation of whether the FSM is achieving its aims.

2.2 Defining Autonomy

Any attempt to measure learner autonomy must necessarily begin by defining what we mean by autonomy. In his report to the Council of Europe Holec describes autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning", which he then specifies as "to have and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e. determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.); evaluating what has been

acquired. The autonomous learner is himself capable of making all these decisions concerning the learning with which he is or wishes to be involved” (1981, p3).

Little (1991) argues that “autonomy is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts.” (p.4) Littlewood (1999) viewed autonomy as having “associations with independence, self-fulfillment, freedom from external constraints and authoring one’s own world without being subject to the will of others” (p.72).

Benson (2001) preferred to define autonomy as “the capacity to take control of one’s learning, largely because the construct of ‘control’ appears to be more open to investigation than the constructs of ‘charge’ or ‘responsibility.’ ” (p.47) Benson goes on to identify 3 levels of control that may be exercised by the learner: “learning management, cognitive processes and learning content” and claims that these 3 levels of control are “clearly interdependent”, (p.50) As Benson sees it, control over learning management “can be described in terms of the behaviours that learners employ in order to manage the planning, organization and evaluation of their learning.” (p.76). Control of cognitive processes refers to the capacity to control cognitive processes central to the learning process such as “attention, reflection and the development of metacognitive knowledge”. (p.98) Control of learning content is simply the ability of the learner to select the content for their own learning. It is important because as Benson notes, “If the goals and content are self-determined, subsequent phases of the learning process become aspects of the solution of a

learning problem that is authentic in the sense that it is the learner's own" (p.100)
In contrast, if the content is determined by someone else "self-direction at the level of method may be reduced to a choice between the most appropriate method of completing a task that lacks authenticity in terms of the learner's own perceived learning needs." (p.100)

In addition to 3 levels of control outlined by Benson, there is some evidence that learners can exercise some control over psychological factors that can have an effect on autonomous behaviour, such as motivation and anxiety. Deci (1978) argues that "intrinsic motivation implies self-direction" (p.198) whilst Ushioda (1996) believes that learners faced with negative affective situations "who know how to limit the motivational damage and take self-motivational initiatives will be at a considerable advantage" (p.54). With respect to anxiety, Oxford (1990) argues that "good language learners are often those who know how to control their emotions and attitudes about learning" whilst Naiman et al., (1978) claim that learners employ strategies to control their anxieties.

For the purposes of this research, Benson's definition of autonomy was adopted. Thus, attempts to identify autonomous behavior focused on identifying the types of behaviours exhibited by learners in autonomous learning at the 3 levels of control identified by Benson. In addition, control of psychological factors influencing learning, such as confidence, anxiety and motivation were incorporated.

3. Methodology

This research project attempted to answer the following key question:

1. Do students who take the FSM show greater awareness and/or development of autonomous language learning skills over course of the Module, than non module takers?

3.1 Research Design

Observing performance in natural contexts, according to Benson, “is perhaps the best way to observe and measure degrees of control over various aspects of learning,” (p.53). However the difficulty of observing a large sample of students in such circumstances is problematic. In addition, even if a student possesses the capacity to direct his own learning, it does not necessarily mean he will exercise it in a particular situation. Thus it was decided that a survey be constructed and administered to learners drawing on their own perceptions of their learning.

3.2 Research instrument

The survey consists of 20 items, 5 items devoted to measuring each level of control and an additional 5 questions to take account of psychological factors. The survey (Appendix A) was translated into Japanese and administered in paper form with the 20 items answered using a 5- point Likert scale, with responses ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. However, some items were stated in the negative such as item 5 which states; ‘I am easily distracted from my study’, in this case a response of Strongly Agree would register a (1) and an answer of Strongly Disagree would register a (5).

3.3 Participants

The research was undertaken with two, first year Freshman English classes. Each class comprised of students that undertook the First Steps Module and other students

that did not. The survey was administered to both module-takers (MTs) and non-module takers (NMTs) at three separate points in time, before the module began, halfway through the module and immediately after the module had concluded. The rationale being that any change in autonomous behavior due to the Modules could be observed.

4. Results

Table 1 below outlines the overall results for MTs and NMTs for all 3 surveys.

Table. 1 Survey Results

Survey 1					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
MTs	21	41	83	69.29	9.09
NMTs	15	56	70	62.80	4.78

Survey 2					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
MTs	20	45	81	70.45	11.72
NMTs	15	48	73	61.40	9.57

Survey 3					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
MTs	21	56	91	74.29	13.15
NMTs	15	53	80	66.00	8.62

The survey results show that MTs recorded higher scores for each survey and the difference in scores between MTs and NMTs was deemed statistically significant. However, since this research is concerned with the effect of the FSM on developing autonomous skills, we need to calculate whether the change from the first survey

to the third survey represents a significant change and whether that change can be attributed to the FSM.

Table. 2 Paired t-tests for MTs and NMTs 1st - 3rd Survey

	df	t	SED	P values for paired t-tests
MTs	20	1.5266	3.5560	0.1425*
NMTs	14	1.2932	2.1650	0.2169*

*p<0.05

Using paired t-tests, results for the first survey were compared to results from the third survey for both MTs and NMTs to ascertain if any significant difference in scores could be observed. Both groups showed improvement in scores from the first survey to the third survey and MTs showed a bigger increase in scores compared to NMTs. However, given the data in table 2 above, it can be seen from the p values for both MTs and NMTs that the differences observed from the first survey to the third survey were not statistically significant at the 0.05 confidence level.

5. Conclusions

Whilst the degree of development of autonomous skills as measured by the survey instrument increased over the 8 week period for MTs, the changes were not significant and thus the effectiveness of the FSM to positively impact the development of autonomous language learning skills is inconclusive. In addition, there are a number of inherent problems with trying to measure the degree of autonomy for any learner or group of learners.

5.1 Measurement Problems

Even if a learner's degree of autonomy can be accurately measured, it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether changes in the degree of autonomy over time can be attributed to one single variable. In this research, both MTs and NMTs showed increases in their scores over the 8 week period with MTs showing slightly bigger increases. However, was the incremental change for MTs attributable to the modules or some other factor? Could the increase be a result of learners having come from a largely teacher centered environment in High School to a more student centered environment at University and thereby introducing an element of autonomy that was not present in their previous learning experiences?

With respect to the aspect of control of learning content, since the content of the FSM is determined by the course administrators, the learner does not exert control over learning content. Thus, there is no reason to expect that learners will show development in this aspect of control.

Another consideration is the measurement instrument itself. Is 5 items enough to capture the degree of autonomy for each element of control and the impact of psychological factors? Should each aspect be equally weighted? Lastly, is it realistic to expect a significant difference in the degree of autonomy of a learner over the 8 week period of the Module? Does the student need more time to assimilate the skills and put them into practice?

5.2 Recommendations

The problem of attribution is a difficult one. Whilst attempts were made to control for as many variables as possible, such as selecting students from the same year that

are receiving the same classroom instruction, it is extremely difficult to control for every factor that may influence a learner's autonomous development.

After learners have completed the FSM module, they are eligible to take further modules. The main difference between the FSM and the subsequent modules is that the learning content is entirely controlled by the learner. Thus, by extending the timeframe of measurement to include subsequent modules, the survey could more accurately capture changes in all aspects of control as well as extend the timeframe over which changes could be observed.

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Appendix A. Survey Instrument

Language Learning Survey.

This survey is designed to find out what kind of language learner you are. It is completely anonymous so no one will ever know your answers. Please take your time to complete the survey and answer the questions honestly. Circle the number that best suits you for each question.

1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Undecided, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree

1. I always prioritize my language study.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I schedule my day so that I have some free time for language study.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I think about whether my language learning has been effective.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I am easily distracted from my study.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I have good concentration when studying.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I always think about how I can learn language in a better way.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I review what I have learned.	1	2	3	4	5
8. If I don't understand something I persevere until I figure it out.		1	2	3	4
9. I am not interested in finding new ways to learn language.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I am aware of my language weaknesses.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I like to decide what I should learn.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I prefer for the teacher to tell me what to learn	1	2	3	4	5
13. I know how to choose resources and materials to help my language learning.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I know where to find materials and resources to help my language learning	1	2	3	4	5
15. I don't know what type of resources and materials are useful for my language learning.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I am motivated to learn language.	1	2	3	4	5
17. It's OK to make mistakes when learning a new language.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I trust my feelings and emotions.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I often feel anxious about my language learning.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I am very curious and like learning new things.	1	2	3	4	5